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REFORMS IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.

By REV. R. DEWITT MALLARY, D.D.,
Lenox, Mass.

ALONE of all the agencies which are under the control or sanction of the church, and often without the assistance of the home—that most potential of all the means employed to affect the life of the young—the Sunday school undertakes to give to the youth an accurate, a spiritual, and a more or less scientific knowledge of the Bible; to indoctrinate him with right ideas about the Bible and the great and eternal verities of the Christian system of faith, truth, and practice; and to mold his character into the permanency of right motives and habits. It follows that, if it is to do its work well, it must first of all understand its function, and then be fully equipped for its performance.

Sunday-school instruction, as a department of the science of pedagogy, must to a great extent be governed by the elemental laws of that science. Yet pedagogy as a science is set aside by religious teachers when it concerns the religious instruction of children, though it is most strenuously insisted upon in all that appertains to their secular instruction. Our Sunday schools today are marked by an absence of graded instruction; all pupils, from the adult to the infant, studying the same lesson; scholarship and common-sense methods of studying the Bible sacrificed to sentiment; many teachers without a gift to teach, and more pupils who do not look at the lesson beforehand, or at least never set themselves to learn it; a book studied in such a patchy way that it loses connection and interest; and no provision made to train up teachers who shall find the sphere of their energies in the Sunday school.

The very first reform to be effected in the Sunday school is one that will bring it into harmony with the plain, fundamental laws of teaching. Instruction should be graded, progressing from stories and facts to principles, doctrines, and criticism, the last named for the most advanced classes. All this instruction, moreover, should be under the auspices of a reverent and scholarly, a historical and constructive knowledge of the Bible. The child should not be taught

facts, principles, and doctrines which one day will rise up to overthrow his faith in the precious and profound realities of the Christian religion.

Then, too, the personality of the teacher should not be permitted to play such a part in the workings of the Sunday school as to be subversive of its function. It sometimes happens that a teacher of the rarest gifts and most winning personality is selfishly monopolized by one class from infancy to young manhood and young womanhood; and when a change is suggested, in order that all the pupils of the school may come under the influence of her mind and heart and methods, there is friction.

There should be a normal class in every Sunday school for the training of teachers, possibly in pedagogy, certainly in the historical understanding of the Bible, and in such books as Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*. Methods should be devised to secure lesson study on the part of the pupils, whether by honor-rolls, or merit-cards, or by the presentation of Bibles or other books. Intelligent study of the Bible, a progressive knowledge of the book, and a spiritual, and to some extent critical, knowledge of the Scriptures—these are the objects to be aimed at.

Sunday-school instruction needs reform along theological lines. This, however, can only come gradually, as the new ways of stating truth become woven, by oft repetition, into the texture of orthodox thinking. At the present stage very few Sunday-school teachers should attempt to teach theology; I may add, also, that very few parents are qualified for this difficult task. It is a fallacy to say that "anybody can teach the Bible." Anybody can teach religion who has experienced "the life of God in the soul." Anybody can teach ethics whose conscience is healthy and sensitive. But everybody cannot teach the Bible or theology. It is not enough that the Sunday-school teachers should meet with their superintendent for the weekly study of the lesson. They should also come under the personal influence and teaching of their pastor in courses of biblical and theological study. The minister should have the most vital and abiding connection with the Sunday school through stated conferences with the teachers and a course of study in the Bible and the doctrines and facts of the Christian faith. He can secure good instruction in the Sunday school, and thus save the children from the necessity of unlearning false interpretations and erroneous doctrines. It would be better to enlarge our classes to the size of classes in the day school, having fewer teachers, but all of

them trained and gifted, than to teach error for truth and truth for error. There is no better illustration of the truth of what I have been saying than that inspiring book for children, *Jesus, the Carpenter of Nazareth*, where to grace of diction and vividness of conception is added correctness of teaching, in great reverence of spirit.

Now, all this leads up to the Bible considered as the Sunday-school text-book, and the various "lesson-helps" used to explain and enforce it. The Revised English Version should be used. The use of it should begin in the Sunday school. Sooner or later that version will take the place of the King James Version, and its superior accuracy, and arrangement in paragraphs, will win its adoption as the standard English Bible. The children should know no other text. But, as at present conducted, the Sunday school puts a "lesson-help" into the child's hand, and so it happens that the children do not come into hand contact with the great text-book as much as they ought.

Then the curriculum should be arranged so as to impart to the pupils a progressive knowledge of the Scriptures. The infant and primary grades will get a knowledge of some of the stories of the Bible, told in simple phrase; the intermediate classes will be taught these and other stories, with a fuller and deeper insight into the principles of ethics and truths of religion developed from them. The young people's classes will study the biblical narrative and teaching with careful analysis, and with the effort to learn their historical significance, their moral lessons and bearings, and their religious import. Further on they will take up those portions of Scripture which are more complex and difficult historically, or more philosophical, abstract, and mystical. The adult classes will study the Bible with reference to applied Christianity, theology, and biblical criticism.

This will be a reform indeed. It will call for the best thought of the church, and possibly for paid workers in this field of incalculable usefulness.

Other departures from the established usage suggest themselves. For example, it is a fair question whether a church would not be expending its energies in the most profitable way, if it concentrated its efforts upon two services for the Lord's Day: one a morning service with sermon, and one an afternoon service in the Sunday school. Sunday school before or after morning service gives scant time for accomplishing the best results.

Much could be said about bringing the Sunday-school instruction into harmony with the church year, and more about the Sunday-school

library as an adjunct of its work. Certain christological features of the Christian year — Advent, Lent, Easter, Whitsuntide — belong to the church of the ages, and should be perpetuated by all communions. The Sunday school is the place where the growing life of the church should be linked with its own antiquity, and should see objectively in these recurring festivals the pictured story of her Lord. The Sunday-school library, also, should receive serious attention. It should broaden so far as to include the “best books” capable of reforming, refining, or transfiguring character. It should reject “goody goody” books, and books whose morals are bad, or whose theology is defective. The biographies of great men are always a source of uplift, and should find place in a Sunday-school library. The romance of missions is fascinating and inspiring. The history of the church, of reform and sociological movements, would be valuable, if only for reference purposes, or for the older members. For the young, stories must ever be the dominant feature of a Sunday-school library, but they should be carefully selected. Real heroes, lofty ideals, bright pictures, happy scenes, grand ministries, noble characters, natural goodness, and great deeds, should characterize the books of the library, and make it a valuable adjunct in Sunday-school work.

It was the custom of an older generation to learn verses, and if we do not insist upon this in the old way, it certainly ought to be expected that Sunday-school children will have at the tip of the tongue the beatitudes, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, the Magnificat, the twenty-third psalm, and other devotional parts of the Psalter, the golden rule, the ten commandments, and the two commandments of Jesus; and perhaps also the apostles’ creed. Verse-learning has become a “lost art.” Let it be revived judiciously.

It has sometimes been said that the Sunday school is the “nursery of the church.” It is an unfortunate phrase, for it restricts the Sunday-school field to little children. It should be the aim of those who have the Sunday school in charge to keep within the reach of its gracious influence the young men and women, and this they will do in proportion as they exert a sanctified and sane ingenuity. The Sunday school should be the school of the Lord’s cadets, out of which shall come those who will bear the brunt of the ceaseless battle between right and wrong, truth and error, light and darkness, the spirit of God and the “powers and principalities of evil.”